

Antebellum Stereotypes Were No Match for Sweet Briar College During the Roaring Twenties:  
1919-1929

Sarah Elizabeth Bohn  
History 005: Doing Sweet Briar History  
Spring 2002

I pledge....

*Sarah Elizabeth Bohn*

The Progressive Era, from 1890 to 1920, saw for the first time many young women with serious agendas attending college<sup>1</sup>. These women had goals of changing the world: childcare, worker's rights, prohibition and suffrage to name a few. The end of World War I, in 1918, and the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, in 1919, marked an incredible change in American history. By the 1920's something changed, women started to be excluded from "graduate and professional schools, corporations, hospitals and other places of training and employment restricted women's entry and advancement."<sup>2</sup> America, especially the south, wanted a return to traditional values. The south in the 1920s, was "shaped by antebellum stereotypes of woman's nature and sphere."<sup>3</sup> According to Amy McCandless, women attending college in the south at this time were not interested in political issues but in acquiring a husband.<sup>4</sup> If the Progressive Era was a time of enlightenment for women in America, why was the south slow to progress?

Gordon observed that "during the politically conservative era following World War I, women's progressive vision diminished, and separate institutions disappeared or lost their distinctive value".<sup>5</sup> That is not to say young women of the roaring twenties did not engage in liberation movements, "Women's protests led to the abolition of chaperone requirements at the University of Wisconsin in 1923, the lifting of the non-smoking ban at Bryn Mawr in 1925, and the ignoring of curfew regulations at coeducational institutions throughout the 1920s."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, the majority of women in the south turned their backs on coeducational colleges and universities causing women's colleges of the south to flourish. The southern women's colleges tried to maintain a "pedestal idea" of what a woman should be in a time when the country was moving toward equality. What then was the reaction of Sweet Briar College to the trend of southern women's colleges to place women back on a pedestal?

Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of southern Virginia, Sweet Briar College could have easily fell victim to this phenomenon. The campus itself was very large though secluded and as a result had to hire strong women for role models to combat the possibility of their students did not leave ignorant of life. To find out if Sweet Briar College

---

<sup>1</sup> Lynn Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, (New Haven: 1999), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, 198

<sup>3</sup> Amy Thompson McCandless, "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940", *History of Higher Education Annual*, (1987), 91.

<sup>4</sup> McCandless, 94

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, 199

<sup>6</sup> McCandless, 92

allowed their students to stay on the pedestal, I looked at different sources to see the view from the president to the students. I used the Faculty Minutes because it was a non-published source, which detailed the actions of the faculty. All though it did not give a complete picture because the secretary does not go into detail of what was said or the mood of the room, just what was to be voted on and the results. I then looked at the Brambler because it was the students' point of view. I also used letters and speeches from the president to find out how she felt about the Students of Sweet Briar College and what she felt should be done.

The faculty minutes of 1919 give insight to understand the relationship that develops in the twenties between students and faculty<sup>7</sup>. At this time, students were treated differently than today's students. The school's faculty and staff were seen as surrogate parents to their students. It was felt that students needed the protection of the faculty. The faculty did this, not because they felt students could not behave around men, but to assure they would not leave Sweet Briar College with a tarnished reputation. Students were not allowed to leave campus without permission and definitely not allowed to be with a man un-chaperoned even on campus. The juniors felt they were mature enough to be responsible to make decisions on their own.

In October of 1919 the junior class compiled a list of privileges they wanted for the up coming semester and years to come<sup>8</sup>. The list was simple. The juniors wanted to sit up after lights out in the junior study. The faculty granted this request. The juniors wanted to walk to Amherst in parties of three. The faculty granted this request with the proviso students must take Highway Twenty-nine and only go before dark. They then requested that they be allowed to walk to Amherst after dark in groups of five. The faculty denied this request with no expansion. The faculty also denied the juniors' request to be able to have dinner with a man at the *Virginia Hotel* without a chaperon. However, the faculty granted that juniors would be able to walk with a gentleman to the lake un-chaperoned but only in the day. They asked to go to and from Lynchburg without a chaperon in a car. The faculty granted this request with the proviso there would be no less than four couples in the car and they would arrive to Sweet Briar College before six in the evening. Although the junior class did not receive all of their privileges they

---

<sup>7</sup> Sweet Briar College Faculty, Faculty Minutes, October 8, 1919, Sweet Briar College Archives [SBCA]

<sup>8</sup> ibid.

requested the faculty to show some faith and understanding in the students giving them a little more freedom.

Emile W. McVea, president of Sweet Briar College from 1916 to 1925, was a strong believer in women's rights. She herself was well educated and employed fulltime. However, she was also a highly religious woman who did not want the reputation of her girls or the school tarnished. She felt that it was her responsibility to protect students and their reputations from this danger. The way she did this was to enforce the rules and punishments with out mercy. For instance, students who broke the rules about being seen with men in town without a chaperone and without permission were expelled<sup>9</sup>.

On May eighth, 1921, she told the faculty that she had "incontrovertible evidence that Stanley Miller and Fritzie Virden had several times been seen in Amherst in company with two men whose reputation is so bad that they are not permitted to come to Sweet Briar College."<sup>10</sup> She then went on to say that she was "certain that the two students had driven with these men for about two hours on Thursday afternoon, May fifth, in a closed automobile without a chaperone."<sup>11</sup> It is not recorded if these two students were given a chance to defend themselves. The faculty expelled the two women without much discussion at the faculty meeting.

In 1922, so there was no more misunderstanding of the rules and regulations, the senior class was asked by the faculty to resubmit their list of privileges<sup>12</sup>. These new privileges would be replacing the old list. These new privileges would be posted so there would be no more confusion between faculty and students. The faculty wanted to make sure that students, at least the senior class, did not have the excuse of "I did not know".

On the twenty-eighth of September 1922 the faculty set down and reviewed the list of twenty-two privileges the seniors requested. Among the requests were to be able to "have weekend absences at their discretion".<sup>13</sup> Before this, students had to have the schools promise to leave campus, even if they were going home. They granted the request to have weekend absences. The seniors asked to "have dates with men during the week"<sup>14</sup> and if men were quests of seniors

---

<sup>9</sup> Sweet Briar College Faculty, Faculty Minutes, May 8, 1921, [SBCA]

<sup>10</sup> ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sweet Briar College Faculty, Faculty Minutes, September 28, 1922, SBCA.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

they be allowed to stay after six on Sunday. This was granted as well. Seniors were also granted the request to ride in cars without chaperones in Lynchburg. However, the seniors had to be back on campus before six at night. The faculty did not make a decision on weather or not seniors could have dinner at the Virginian un-chaperoned with men. President McVea asked about the policy at Randolph-Macon Women's College and would determine whether or not it would be allowed. The faculty did not record the answer to this request<sup>15</sup>.

Although these changes were progressive for their time, the women of Sweet Briar College wanted more. In 1923 a student frustrated with the limit on her independence, wrote to the Brambler her own set of rules debutantes should follow. Some of her rules are as follows: "1. Strict convention decrees that if a debutante accepts from a man any gift more valuable than candy, flowers or a tip on the Stock Market, she shall not mention the fact to her mother. 2. No debutante should shoot crap during the closed season. 6. At Sunday night bridge parties no really nice debutante should cheat. 7. Debutantes should never attend prizefights un-chaperoned."<sup>16</sup> Her Rules mock the Sweet Briar College establishment; they do not offend it. The change to less strict enforcement of the rules does not accrue over night. It takes the changing of the guard for there to be a connection between faculty and student understanding.

President McVea retired her post at Sweet Briar College in 1925 due to health reasons. Her last year was marked with sadness and change. She was a beloved president of Sweet Briar College and felt strongly about a women's role in the world. She put pen to paper to express her hopes for the graduating class of 1925. In her fond farewell to the students she said, "go forth without fear. You will meet hard things, but who would be content with ease and softness?" Reading this today you could put into a modern context and have the same meaning. She wants students to experience life, just not while at Sweet Briar. Her past actions of expelling students for fractionating with men un-chaperoned will attest for that. She went on to add "each one of you is needed today; what you think, what you do, what vision you hold will affect for good or ill your day and time."<sup>17</sup> She knows the role of women is still evolving from the private sphere to a social one and hopes through her strict discipline students can learn to meet the

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Celia Marshall (ed.), "Rules for the Debutante 1923-1924", *The bramble*, 1/2 (December 1923), 22.

<sup>17</sup> Emilie W. McVea to the Directors, Faculty and Students of Sweet Briar College, May 1925, Farwell correspondence, SBCA.

challenge *after* they leave Sweet Briar College. McVea does not want the women of Sweet Briar to acquire only a husband after graduation.

This is farther proven in her last address for all of the students in one of her last published articles for Sweet Briar College. President McVea writes about her vision for Sweet Briar students in the June 1925 issue of *The Bulletin*. In this address she states "I would have the graduate of Sweet Briar a woman strong in body, sincere in thought, clear of vision: a modern women using the larger freedom of today, while preserving the courtesy and the charm of the woman of yesterday."<sup>18</sup> She goes on to say "she (SBC student) would rejoice always in life and life's great adventure; she would believe in work, and she would face her work and her responsibility with high courage."<sup>19</sup> No one should doubt the love and respect she had for her students. McVea did what she felt best to guide her students through pre-adulthood before she left. McVea gives President Meta Glass her full support and leaves the student body with her words of encouragement.

Now, the students of Sweet Briar College then welcome a new president, Meta Glass. The changes seen between the two presidents were not overnight. It took a few years for Meta Glass to get a feel for Sweet Briar College and the student body. Meta Glass proved not to be as harsh a disciplinarian. Students who broke the rules did not seem to suffer as harsh a penalty as before; they were given many more chances than the students who came before them under McVea's rule.

Even with this new acceptance from the faculty, students still felt the need to defend themselves from snide remarks made about them. In 1926, the saying "The younger generation is going to the dogs" angered a student to the point she needed to say something. Kathryn Graham wrote to the October issue of the *Brambler* to defend her and fellow students against the accusation. She gives a brief analogy to her grandmother and mother's generation to her own. A few examples are: "Grandmother wore a wig- mother wore her hair done up high- daughter bobs hers- but they all had to wash it now and then." The most telling example is: " Grandmother called the man 'my beau'- mother called her's 'my fiancé'- daughter calls her's 'the boyfriend'-

---

<sup>18</sup> Emile W. McVea, "My Ideal for Sweet Briar Students", Manuscript, 1920, SBCA.

<sup>19</sup> Emile W. McVea, "My Ideal for Sweet Briar Students", *Bulletin Sweet Briar College-An Interpretation*, 8/6 (June 1925), 12.

but each managed to get the ring in the end.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly she felt that her and her peers were not doing anything different from what past generations had done. She tries to smooth the misunderstandings happening between the two generations.

The faculty of Sweet Briar College understood that changes were happening between the two generations making their customs different but still felt it important for women to be chaperoned. The faculty under the new president, Meta Glass, did not enforce as harsh a punishment. This is seen when the Dean Dutton gave her 1927-1928 Report of the Dean to the President Meta Glass. In the report she explains that the faculty suspended Anne Mason Brent, a junior, for one semester and lost her privileges for overnight absences the semester. Her transgression was, she comes back for “driving to Charlottesville with a man un-chaperoned then attended a dance without permission.”<sup>21</sup> Some of the other offenses alleged in the report were “drinking with University of Virginia boys” and smoking in the dorm rooms, no one who broke these rules were ever punished more severely than the suspended.<sup>22</sup> Under president McVea Miss Brent would have been expelled. This shows that under Meta Glass the faculty was more lenient with students. However the faculty did still on occasion expel students for extreme disregard of the rules. For example: the faculty asked Flo Brown to withdraw from school after she came back from Lynchburg in a car with a man un-chaperoned at one-thirty in the morning and “driving to the Country Club then dining there with a man un-chaperoned and without permission.”<sup>23</sup> This was just too much even for a liberal faculty to except.

President Meta Glass took notice of and listened to her students. She guided students to make the right decisions; she did not make them for the student. She also spoke with other principals and faculty about what was happening on their campuses. She spoke to a principal who had similar problems with students wanting more privileges at his school’s plight. He told her the “majority of our students come from conservative homes we have felt distinctly in the past three or four years the trend toward individualism. This trend has manifested itself mainly through requests for additional privileges.”<sup>24</sup> The reason given for the problem of individualism

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Graham, “Girls”, *The Brambler*, 4/1 (October 1926), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Emily Helen Dutton, PhD., 1927-1928 Report of the Dean, SBCA.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>24</sup> Meta Glass, “Self-Express and the College Student”, Address for the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls” February 21, 1929, p. 5.

is “the individualist take the position that the college is in no way responsible for her behavior or safety. So, if she can escape this regulation she is justified in doing so, this spirit often leads students to be entirely in different to the effect their conduct may have on the good name of the college.”<sup>25</sup> The Principals were afraid of how the students’ actions would reflect back on the student and the school. President Glass wanted to know if the young women at Sweet Briar College felt the same way.

To find out, she met with a small group of Sweet Briar College juniors and seniors for a “frank discussion” one night in early February 1929. The group of young women had different backgrounds, however not too different, all of the young women were white and of good academic standing. Although President Glass had many meetings with the students this night was devoted to the topic of, “was there a need for chaperones at Sweet Briar College?” Miss Glass wanted to know their attitudes toward chaperones so to know the truth she did not hold them to the Sweet Briar College regulations.

When the question was put forth one of the young women asked “Miss Glass, what do you mean by chaperone?” Trying to keep the mood light Miss Glass imitated Mrs. Gundy who chaperoned the dances. After the giggling stopped, they answered saying that chaperones were “utterly un-necessary and ineffective”. They went on to say they “ranked [chaperones] with pretty decorations and good refreshments- hardly so important as good music”. The young women noted that by a women’s junior and senior years at colleges she know best from right and wrong. They felt strongly that they could solve any problems that might come up better than a chaperone. The young woman said that their fellow students were better chaperones because of “unfounded gossip”.<sup>26</sup>

This marked the trend toward open dialogue between faculty and students. No more guessing what the other side is thinking. President Glass spoke with her students about what their needs and wants were. That is not to say she agreed with everything, she did not. She did however try to understand the other side and explain why she disagreed.

---

<sup>25</sup> Meta Glass, p. 5

<sup>26</sup> Meta Glass, “Self-Express and the College Student”, Address for the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls”

After World War I women in the south were faced with antebellum stereotypes. Was this because of the actions of southerners or because the north did not feel they progressed fast enough? Looking at Sweet Briar College we find it is the north that placed this stereotype on the south because it did not feel they progress fast enough. Even in it's southern seclusion Sweet Briar College was a place for women to learn and grow.

The faculty at Sweet Briar College in the beginning of the 1920s was a surrogate family to students not because they held back students but to guided them through their advanced learning years. We learn that when students want more privileges such as walking to town or staying up later during 1919, all they do is ask and the faculty tries its best to accommodate. If the faculty felt it would not jeopardize the students' virtue. That is not to say students could walk all over the faculty. Two students did get expelled in 1921 for breaking the rules. Soon after the faculty asked for a formal list of privileges the senior class wanted. They would review the list and approve what they felt best in 1922. The faculty did this because the want the seniors to have special privileges and so there would be no misunderstandings about what the students could and could not do. Still we see students mocking the rules for debutante for the 1923- 1924 academic year.

The turning point for the students in their quest for freedom from stereotypes comes when President McVea retires in 1925 and Meta Glass takes the reigns. That is not to say McVea hindered women from becoming all they could be just that some may look at her harsh discipline and say that it was done in part to keep southern women on a pedestal.

Meta Glass proves not as harsh a disciplinarian as McVea was. Students are treated more like adults and less as children. This is proved in 1929 when she asked a few students to have a talk with her about chaperones. I choose this as my last story because it answers the question of what Sweet Briar College reaction to the trend of placing women back on a pedestal. They did not do this, the faculty and both presidents want the students of Sweet Briar to be thinking, independent adults who led full and rich lives.

### Bibliography

#### Primary Sources:

*The Brambler* 1923-1990. Found in the Sweet Briar College Achieves room two on the first bookshelf, top two shelves. I used, volume 7 issue 1 (November 1920), page 46, volume 1 issue 2 (December 1923), page 22, and volume 4 issue 1 (October 1926) page 11. This is a student published magazine; it had student opinions but not facts.

Faculty Minutes, Volume 1-9 (1906- 1934) Found in Sweet Briar College Archives room two, second shelf from bottom, last bookcase on right. I used October 8, 1919, May 8, 1921 and, September 28, 1922 because it told what actions took place however it did not give all of the details.

Manuscript, 1920. Emile W. McVea, "My Ideal for Sweet Briar Students", Found in Sweet Briar College Archives in the McVea box top shelf, last bookcase on left. I used this because it showed what the president felt about her students. It did not tell how the students felt. Also used, "My Ideal for Sweet Briar Students", *Bulletin Sweet Briar College—An Interpretation*, 8/6 (June 1925) 12.

Report of the Dean, 1927- 1928. Found in file folder marked "miscellaneous 1927, 1928, 1929" in room two of the Sweet Briar College Archives on the table on the front right corner. Emily Helen Dutton, PhD, wrote the report. This report gave a list of reprimands taken by the faculty against the students. It does not say what the students' response was.

Speech by Meta Glass, "Self-Express and the College Student", Address for the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls", February 21, 1929. Found in room two of Sweet Briar College Archives. I used this because it showed what the president wanted from her students how ever it did not give a student opinion.

#### Second Sources:

Gordon, Lynn. "Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era." History 005 (Spring 2002)

McCandless, Amy Thompson. Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920- 1940", History of Higher Education Annual, (1987), History 005 (Spring 2002).